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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a group counseling model for bereaved adolescents, which was designed to enhance awareness of grief issues among adolescents and to provide guidelines for addressing those needs in a group setting. The decision to develop a support group for bereaved students is reviewed and the steps taken by a Fairfax County, Virginia secondary school to implement the group are outlined. Interviews with students as potential group members were held and parental permission was requested. The first meeting of the group is a time to establish group norms and for members to describe the deaths they have experienced. The second meeting is the time to share keepsakes and mementos. The next 11 sessions, grouped into an integration phase, a group functioning and maintenance phase, and the termination phase are detailed. Issues addressed in the sessions include unfinished business, role changes in the family, changing traditions and special occasions, dating and remarriage of a surviving parent or adoption of a new sibling, dreams, financial stress, and the possible death of self or other parent. (NRB)

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COPING WITH THE ULTIMATE CHANGE, DEATH OF A FAMILY MEMBER: A SUPPORT GROUP FOR BEREAVED ADOLESCENTS

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COPING WITH THE ULTIMATE CHANGE, DEATH OF A FAMILY MEMBER:

A SUPPORT GROUP FOR BEREAVED ADOLESCENTS

If we believe with Lindemann (1976) that what is not dealt with is likely to cause problems, and if we acknowledge that young people are often "spared" or overlooked in the grief process, then it is readily understandable why a high proportion of a school social worker's referrals is specifically loss related. A need to respond in a helpful, meaningful way to the grieving adolescents who were coming to our attention at the Fairfax County, Virginia, secondary school where we work became pressing. How to do this effectively and efficiently became the basic question.

A cursory search of the literature and survey of other mental health professionals yielded little precedent for providing services for adolescents who have lost a significant other through death. Therefore, we originated a plan to form a group for these teens which would address many of the basic grief process issues.

School guidance counselors and secretaries were polled for names of additional students who might benefit from such a group. After interviewing students and requesting parental permission for group participation, a group of thirteen adolescents evolved. The design called for beginning by establishing group norms and then moving immediately to an invitation to describe the death. For the second meeting, members were invited to bring a keepsake to share. From there, sessions were designed to address such issues as unfinished business, role changes in the family, changing traditions and special occasions, dating and remarriage of the other parent or adoption of a new sibling, dreams, and other concerns such as financial stress and possible death of self or other parent.

What was not anticipated was the bonding that occurred among group members, an extra-curricular activity involving the group and two high school classes, and the creative ideas for expanding this intervention to include a much greater number of students next school year.

Out presentation will describe the process of developing this group, from inception of the pilot program to the group's final celebration after 17 meetings, when student members declared in a very concrete fashion that "Friends Help A Lot."

"Right in the middle of school, tears come to my eyes. I feel embarrassed and look the other way. My friends don't know what to say to me."

"I sit in class and I don't hear anything that's being said. Then I go home and have this huge stack of homework. I can't seem to do anything. Often, it's 11 o'clock at night before I can begin my homework."

"It was Gregg's birthday. I had no business being in school. All day, all I could see was Gregg's face before my eyes."

PREGROUP PHASE

Statements like these made by students, coupled with reports from guidance counselors, teachers, and concerned parents alerted us to a need in our school to provide a service for grieving adolescents. What to do about it and how to do it efficiently and effectively was the basic question.

The secondary school (grades 7 - 12) in Fairfax County, Virginia, to which we are both assigned, has an enrollment of approximately 4500 students. We share office space and constituency. Frequently, we consult each other about students' needs and appropriate responses. As the high incidence of bereaved students in our population became more and more apparent, we discussed possible interventions, including formation of a counseling group in the school.

Neither consultation with bereavement specialists nor a search of the available literature provided a model for group counseling with bereaved adolescents. Undaunted, we proceeded to design a model and

then consult with other teachers, guidance counselors, and school secretaries to expand the list of grieving students.

A personal interview with each potential member, to determine the student's interest in participating and to discuss relevant issues, was held prior to the first group meeting. An information letter was sent to parents requesting permission for their child to participate in the group. Likewise, teacher cooperation was enlisted as students miss a different class each week to attend group on a rotating schedule. Each student was provided with a group schedule for the semester.

During the preformation stage, the grief process and relevant grief issues were the central ingredients in planning the group experience. An outline of pertinent issues and predictable feelings provided direction for facilitating group sessions.

This paper describes a model for group counseling for bereaved adolescents in a public school setting. Information included is drawn from the current professional expertise and literature. The methodology and procedures were developed by the authors. Additionally, it is designed to enhance awareness of grief issues among adolescents and to provide guidelines for addressing those needs in a group setting.

Acknowledging that each group is unique, dependent upon its members' various stages of recovery, previous group experience, maturity level, death experience, and support systems, there remain certain universalities upon which this paradigm was designed. Developed through trial and error over the past three years, this model presents a general guideline.

SESSION I: Following Hartford's (1971) notion that group

members "must develop trust, reach out to each other, respond to each other before the group can move into the formation stage" (p. 76), the first session begins with a comfort building exercise. Then, norms are established with particular emphasis on confidentiality to lay the foundation for trust building. Two other norms which are always included are prompt, regular attendance, and members' rights to remain silent. As Kim noted during the first session of her senior year, after a year's absence from group, "I hardly said a word in group during my whole sophomore year, but it helped me so much just to be here and listen to others."

Then follows an invitation to students to share their particular death experience, based on the notion that universality or the "disconfirmation of their feelings of uniqueness is a powerful source of relief" (Yalom, 1970, p. 10). As Jeanne said upon returning to the group for her second year, "When I first came to this group a month after my mother died, I didn't know anyone who had had a death in the family. To meet people my own age in the same situation was such a relief!" Jeanne's comment seems to support Yalom's notion that there is nothing of greater importance for the adolescent than to be included and accepted in some group (Yalom, 1970).

GROUP FORMATION PHASE

SESSION II: The progressive development of group cohesiveness and a safe environment for affective sharing of one's inner world is facilitated during the second session by the sharing of KeepsaKes or momentos. Recognizing the tenuous group development at this stage and

the members' tender feelings, use of symbols provides the students with a safe vehicle for an initial limited exposure of grief feelings. The photos, jewelry, poetry, and articles of clothing spur memories and the whole gamut of feelings known to be associated with a grief response: sadness, loneliness, guilt, anger, worry and fear. Amy's sadness and sense of loneliness were poignantly evident when she buried her face in her father's sweater and described the comfort these lingering fragrances provided for her. She reported comforting herself in this way when the sadness and loneliness became overwhelming. Recognizing that the sweater may wear out and lose its fragrance, Amy said, "But I'll always have a constant reminder of my father. Everytime I look into the mirror, I see a part of him in me." Lisa brought a picture of her older sister who had suicided two months earlier. Comments from the group about the two girls' similar appearances led Lisa to divulge, "Everyone always says that we follow one another's footsteps."

The keepsake-sharing technique not only allows students to touch on feelings in a safe environment but also provides leaders with valuable specific concerns of individual group members, thus setting the stage for appropriate interventions. At this stage of group development, bonding and cohesiveness are recognizable by empathic and encouraging group interaction, as well as unsolicited statements about the value of belonging to the group.

INTEGRATION PHASE

SESSIONS III, IV, V: Continuing the group cohesive building process by sharing death experiences increases the likelihood of

perceived similarities and stimulates intermember empathy and acceptance. The curative factor of universality may be set into motion by retelling the story, as nearly as it was experienced, in the supportive group environment. Additionally, this has been demonstrated to be an effective means of decathecting the loss (Frears and Schneider, 1981). "Retelling the story seems to be a needed source of healing in the process of grief resolution" (Balk, 1983, p. 155).

Retelling the story and reliving the experience is always painful. Nonetheless, members are usually willing to share in response to a simple invitation by the leaders. The resultant outpouring of emotions provides leaders with an opportunity to model empathic responses and to encourage supportive interaction among group members. Throughout this process, there are ample opportunities for educating the students and normalizing their grief reactions, a process which continues throughout the lifespan of the group. It is incumbent upon the leaders to constantly monitor the impact of adolescent developmental issues and heightened sensitivity to the loss experience.

Because the retelling is so painful, occasionally there is a member who does not volunteer to tell his or her story. For example, Cathy, whose mother had hanged herself eight years earlier, seemed unable to begin her story. The reading of a vignette (Krementz, 1981) which parallels her experience provided the leaders with an opportunity to gently engage Cathy in talking about her mother's suicide. Lindemann's (1944) hypothesis that what is not dealt with is likely to cause problems seems to have been borne out in Cathy's case, as she has experienced significant peer, family, and academic problems in the years since her mother's death.

In contrast, Monica seems to be functioning successfully in all realms of her life. She joined the group three months after her father had died of cancer and reported open sharing with her mother and younger sister about their mutual loss. She was readily able to retell her story in group and experienced an additional source of support as she was learning to manage her grief. As the first anniversary of her father's death approaches, Monica continues to use the group and to express gratitude to her supportive peers, with whom she values the opportunity to be vulnerable and comforted.

The process of retelling each story is an integrating factor (Hartford, 1971), leaving members ready to verbally assess their purpose and participation in the group. By devoting part of the fifth session to the assessment process, the leaders can direct the students toward connecting their grief work with generalized improved functionality. In addition to the educational aspect of the assessment process, directions for individual and group interventions surface.

GROUP FUNCTIONING AND MAINTENANCE PHASE

SESSIONS VI, VII, VIII, IX, X: Through the process of sharing keepsakes, retelling the stories, and assessing personal and group goals, many issues of concern arise from the group members. This list predictably includes final rites, special occasions, unfinished business, abrupt and unsought changes, and the difficulties of being a bereaved adolescent. These issues provide the foci for intervention during the group functioning and maintenance phase (Hartford, 1971).

Acknowledging 1) that grief management is facilitated by

externalizing thoughts and feelings, by receiving empathic support, and by learning about bereavement; 2) that the adolescent's ego strength is weakened by the struggle to establish his or her identity, resulting in heightened vulnerability to the loss experience; and 3) that loss provides an opportunity for growth (Davenport, 1981; Balk, 1983), the leaders guide discussion through these five sessions to focus on the salient issues listed above. A myriad of intense and complex emotions emerges in connection with these issues. The leaders' empathic and educational interventions are designed to help members accept these feelings and put them into perspective. Concurrently, the universality of these experiences and feelings deepens peer support and networking. The potential for personal growth is limitless!

A session devoted to final rites can elicit discussion about open or closed casket, funeral practices, burial, cremation, post-service gatherings, and cemetary visits. In addition to the expected feelings which are generally attached to these events, members share a cross-section of other concerns. For example, Amy described her efforts to appear stoic at her father's funeral to counter her grandfather's open weeping. Jo expressed unforgiving and long lasting rage at family members for their merry making following her father's burial. Michelle and Katie both voiced a desire to visit the cemetary long after the adults in their families perceived a need to take them there. It usually apppears that these adolescents feel left out, not consulted, and misunderstood at this juncture, substantiating the notion that young people are often overlooked in the grief process.

Holidays, anniversaries, and other special occasions evoke especially painful feelings during the first year of bereavement. The

duration of these intense feelings has been minimized for students who have benefitted from early intervention. For others, the intense pain continues to resurface, occasion after occasion. Katie, whose older sister died five years earlier, shared the pain she felt and observed in her family when her sister's birthday coincided with Mother's Day. No one talked about thoughts or feelings in that family. Instead, her mother closeted herself in her room all day, and Katie kept her sad, confused feelings to herself. In contrast, Monica found the first Thanksgiving without her father "okay" and "not nearly as bad as I thought it would be". She anticipated her feelings of emptiness, verbalized them in group, and was able to face the occasion with confidence.

A session in which members face unfinished business with the deceased can be easily launched with a statement such as, "After someone dies, the survivors often think of things they said or didn't say, did or didn't do, which they wish had been different." Students are usually able to personalize this type of statement and share specific experiences. For example, Peter, whose father was killed in Spain, had decided not to go to the airport with him that last time. Peter struggled with his never having said goodbye, never having said that last time, "I love you", and with his guilt about having chosen to be with his friends instead of family at the airport. When Jo's father, a recovering alcoholic, died suddenly and unexpectedly, the relationship between the two of them was just beginning to prosper. She felt cheated and angry at the termination of this fledgling relationship. The unfinished business issue surfaced frequently for these two bereaved students and appeared to be one factor in their

slow, difficult acceptance of the loss. Though the opportunity to reminisce and share important feelings exists when there is an expected death, many students were unable to accept the finality of the illness and consequently seize this opportunity. Jeanne, whose mother was dying with cancer, recalls hearing the doctor state the limited time her mother had to live. Jeanne's denial prevented her from "tying up loose ends" and saying goodbye. It seems apparent that acknowledging a pending death is counter to adolescent invincibility, thus making unfinished business an issue for all bereaved teenagers.

Sudden and uninvited changes as a result of death impact on teenagers in various ways. Family finances concern some, while others find their families more comfortable as a result of insurance payments. In every family, role changes occur. Some adolescents are catapulted into adult roles. They find themselves being auto mechanic, domestic and financial manager, parent to the surviving parent, confidente, and comforter. Concern for the widowed parent's emotional status and social life is raised. Some teenagers adamantly object to their parent's consideration of developing new relationships, while others encourage this. All students address changed attitudes toward life and death as a result of their experience with death. They agree that prior to the death, little time had been spent thinking about the fragility of life, especially their own. However, the experience of losing someone dear triggers a new realization about the unpredictability and delicate balance of life. This pseudomaturation is evident in other ways as well. Julie, for example, often initiated dialogue among family members in which heretofore unverbalized feelings and memories of Gregg, her three year old drowned brother, were shared.

Awkward and inept interaction between the bereaved and his/her associates is a persistently recurring theme. The question, "What does your mother do?" repeatedly caused discomfort for Bethany, a ninth grader whose mother had died two years earlier. Amy complained about her best friend's inability to listen to her talk about her father's death. Patrick, whose older brother had suddenly died a few months earlier, related an incident in which the boys' coach was unable to continue any conversation upon learning of the brother's death. Again and again, group members cited experiences indicating general discomfort, fear, and avoidance of the bereaved and the topic of death. Within the group however, members express support and listen with apparent comfort to their peers' outpourings of pain. Sometimes, in the midst of pain, humor can lighten the oppressive mood. It can also be an indicator of progressive healing. For example, Bethany speculated responding to that inevitable question, "What does your mother do?" with "Well, I could say she sleeps a lot!" The resultant laughter in group provided some levity to the somber setting and evidence that grief can be managed.

Throughout these five sessions, experiences and feelings are relived in a supportive and empathic atmosphere, resulting in the students' increased tolerance and ability to deal with the societal taboo, death. They are also regularly exposed to possibilities for personal growth and maturity as an essential part of the recovery process.

SESSION XI: Theorists and researchers have noted the potential for growth and not merely the threat to well-being presented by traumatic stress (Baldwin, 1978). Building on past material and

previous interventions, this session focusses on ideas for rechanneling the students' energy. Questions like "What can you do with some of your time and energy that would make you feel better about this loss?" generate introspection and speculation by members. Additionally, it is helpful for students to plan activities to "balance the ledger". For example, Amy and Jeanne both decided to apply for peer counseling training, recognizing that they could work especially well with other bereaved students. André was inspired to write a poem about his grief and newfound self-awareness. One group decided to plant a dogwood tree on the school grounds.

At some point during the school year, each group has been invited to share grief and growth experiences with other students. These field trips always provide the opportunities to interact with strangers on a very personal level. In this eleventh session, it is important for students to recognize these sharing and educating experiences as one indication that the grief experience has been a catalyst for growth.

TERMINATION PHASE

SESSION XII: In preparation for termination, the twelfth session is spent enumerating and evaluating the group accomplishments and shortcomings, discussing post-termination follow-up for individual members, and planning a celebration. During this pretermination session, it is anticipated that feelings of loss and abandonment from other life experiences may be reactivated. Keeping in mind this population's hypersensitivity to loss and termination, the leaders label and acknowledge these feelings. It is also pertinent to

reiterate the opportunities available for potential growth in anticipated life transitions.

Group accomplishments and shortcomings may be examined in three respects: the meaning for individual members, the meaning to the leaders, and the relation to group purposes and goals (Hartford 1971). The material generated during this process can be connected to daily life functioning with such questions as: "What have you learned about living that will help you with your next loss?" And "Have there been ways you have caused yourself extra pain throughout this ordeal?"

In this session, is is also useful to discuss options for members' continued growth and grief management. Some students may feel sated and terminate the group experience. Others may be referred for more intense individual and/or family therapy. Still others may opt to join the group when it reconvenes the following semester to insure an ongoing peer support group and a therapeutic environment for coping with grief in the school setting. These seasoned members provide validity for potential new members and act as catalysts and role models in the group. Not only does the group benefit from these experienced members' participation, but the individuals have an additional opportunity to reinforce and augment their grief management.

In keeping with the adolescent penchant for celebrating, the students always suggest having a party. Planning this ritual for ending the group is an appropriate activity during this pretermination session. The students take responsibility for the planning and execution of the final session.

SESSION XIII: Celebrating life is the theme for the final session. The students always assume the party will be light spirited

and fun, and they bring beverages and snacks to share. On one occasion, two homemade cakes were presented to the group. Katie's chocolate-frosted cake bore the finger-drawn inscription, "Understanding". Christie's white frosting was decorated in blue, saying "Friends Help a Lot". A handmade card, presented to the leaders, said, "We had a lot of fun in the group. It helped us out a lot. Thank you very much. We hope to be in this group next year, if you have one. Once again, thank you for your help! Now we know how much friends can help!"

This sort of cue provides a perfect entree for the leaders to acknowledge the group's ending. Summarizing statements directed toward individual members can highlight each one's personal growth. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that this formal ending does not necessarily coincide with the end of personal grieving. Students are encouraged to discuss with family and group members the value of continuing the group experience.

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Because of the enthusiastic response to this grief group by participants, their parents and friends, and the school staff, it has become a standard offering at the school. The group experience provides adolescents with an opportunity to expand their repertoire of intellectual and emotional responses to loss. Learning to manage their grief helps students return to an optimal level of functioning, so that they are able to say, with Camus, "In the midst of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer." (Moffatt, 1982, p. xv).

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PARADIGM FOR A SUPPORT GROUP FOR BEREAVED ADOLESCENTS

	CONTENT	LEADER'S ROLE	RATIONALE
'regroup Phase	Pregroup: referral	solicit referrals	ensure appropriate membership
	screening	interview referred student	" " "
	parent and teacher permission	prepare, distribute, collect written parent and teacher permission	enlist support of parents and teachers
	planning	peruse pertinent literature; outline salient issues to be covered	design logical, sound progression of interventions
	I: comfort building exercise	facilitate	reduce anxiety level
	establish norms	guide discussion toward universal agreement of norms	develop trust
	share death experience succinctly	gently invite members to share who died, when, and how	establish universality; counter societal taboo
roup Formation Phase	II; keepsake sharing	acknowledge importance of memento and relationship it symbolizes; invite exploration of connected feelings	develop group cohesiveness and trust by using symbols to safely share inner world affectively
ntegration Phase	III: & IV: retelling "the story"	invite; respond empathically; encourage supportive interaction among members; educate; normalize; monitor impact of adolescent developmental issues; read vignette to stimulate reticent members	stimulate intermember empathy; set in motion curative factor of universality; decathect the loss; educate and normalize re: grief reaction
	V: goal setting	facilitate recognition of issues; e.g. "what are some of the things you want to learn about yourself in the grief process?" or "what are your particular concerns about your loss? For example, are you worried about your grades, your relationships?" etc.	members assess individual purpose for group participation; connect grief work with generalized improved functionality

	CONTENT	LEADER'S ROLE	RATIONALE
roup Functioning nd Maintenance hase	VI: final rites	"Families have different ways of ritualizing a death." Etc.	facilitate grief management by externalizing thoughts and feelings, by receiving empathic support, by learning about bereavement; universality of these experiences deepens peer support and networking
	VII: special occasions	"Special occasions are especially hard during the first year following a loved one's death." Etc.	
	VIII: unfinished business	"After someone dies, the survivors often think of things they said or didn't say, did or didn't do, which they wish had been different." Etc.	
	IX: changes	"Lots of things change in families when someone dies." Etc.	
	X: being bereaved	"People seem to be uncomfortable around those who have experienced a death." Etc.	
	XI: rechanneling energy; balancing the ledger	"What can you do with some of your time and energy that would make you feel a bit better about your loss?" Etc.	loss can be catalyst for growth
ermination Phase	XII: evaluation	"What have you learned about yourself that has been helpful in other relationships?" Etc.	concretize coping skills; generalize learned material to other life experiences
	planning post-termination follow-up	individualize suggestions; invite input from group members	encourage continued growth and grief management
	planning celebration	delegate responsibility for celebration to group: "It's your party!"	
	XIII: celebration	celebrate	ritualize termination
	highlight personal growth	comment on individual members' personal growth; say goodbye	acknowledge individual strengths; validate the group process